Learner-Customized Interactions:
Introducing a Procedure for Acquiring English Using Web Resources

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Abstract

This paper presents a set of tools to be used by adult learners of English in their free time to complement formal instruction in the classroom. The main goal is to provide learners with a starter kit to improve each of the four skills by enabling them to interact in English with written or spoken texts and with native English speakers using free-of-charge Internet websites. The paper compiles a list of resources ensuring the greatest degree of flexibility in choosing content as well as partners (*learner-customized interaction*). While these resources can be used by most students of English regardless of their first language, the complete set was originally designed for and tested with adult Japanese learners of English as a foreign language who reported increased motivation and engagement. These resources are ideally suited for university students who cannot afford study-abroad language programs, hiring private tutors or attending English conversation schools.

Keywords

learner autonomy, C.A.L.L., interaction, comprehensible input, learning partner

Introduction

While recognizing that formal instruction does help the language learner (Littlewood, 2004, p. 512), it is crucial to acknowledge the limits of how much time can be spent interacting with and receiving feedback from an English language teacher, especially in contexts where English is taught as a Foreign Language (EFL), where the assumption is that the only exposure to English occurs in the classroom (Ellis, 1994, p. 12). It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that most EFL teachers are continuously striving to find the optimum balance guaranteeing the most effective use of the weekly two-three hours during which 20 to 40 students are supposed to become competent users of English (Monbukagakushō, 2014a).

The obvious conclusion has been drawn by many language teaching professionals that "to succeed in their studies students need to be not only effective learners within the classroom but also outside and beyond it" (Rear, 2005, p. 1). Whereas few teachers would dispute this conclusion, in practice it is often the case that "the resources needed for action are unavailable or denied" to learners (Brookfield, 1993, p. 238). In addition to making their students aware of the importance of learning outside the classroom, teachers need to be able to present them with a set of resources to achieve higher proficiency levels in all four skills.

Fortunately, what used to be impossible before the Internet came of age can now be achieved quite easily as we have access to a wide variety of English learning resources which was simply not available before. That being said, most language learners (and teachers) face a huge hurdle in shifting through the sheer amount of information and resources. What is needed is a brief list of Internet websites which meet two basic conditions:

1. They must be free-of-charge to minimize the burden for the learner.
2. They have to be flexible enough to allow the learner to choose the content she/he interacts with, as well as the partner she/he communicates with.

Literature Review

Many teachers have an affinity to the idea of focusing on the learner (Nunan, 1991, p. 167) and make great efforts to describe effective strategies on how students should go about learning a language (i.e., the process). Nonetheless, it is often the case that teachers stop short of providing specific instructions showing how students can locate useful learning resources (i.e., the tools), other than making general suggestions about using real-world examples in the classroom (Offner, 1997). In addition to identifying those learning styles and strategies which correlate with high proficiency levels and sharing these insights with their students, teachers need to be able to present learners with a specific set of tools to be used *outside* the classroom.

Some EFL professionals have realized that the Internet can provide a wide range of opportunities for learning, yet persist in using these resources only in the classroom context (Zhao, 2008). Thus, students fail to take advantage of the Internet's most useful feature: its enormous capacity to accommodate differences in needs, tastes or interests.

Viewed in this light, it is easy to understand the wide appeal enjoyed by Krashen's *input hypothesis* (Krashen, 1982) which downplays the effects of formal instruction (inside the classroom) and emphasizes the importance of interaction with texts learners can both understand and find interesting (outside the classroom). Besides showing a bias towards reading which makes acquisition of the other three skills (listening, writing and especially speaking) problematic, the main issue faced by Krashen and others who have tried to test the *input hypothesis* is that of securing the actual texts (usually books) which could serve as *comprehensible input* (Krashen, 2003, p. 25).

The effectiveness of encouraging independent learning seems to be borne by actual practice (Rear, 2005). On the other hand, not all learners can benefit from generous school budgets allowing teachers to stock a sufficient number of graded readers in a self-access learning center (Gardner, 2011). Moreover, there is no way to guarantee that the teachers' selections would match the learners' tastes or, to borrow Krashen's words, that these books will constitute *compelling input* (Krashen, 2011).

Research Questions

This paper was born from the author's practice of teaching adult Japanese learners of English (company employees) in a context in which formal instruction was limited to an hour and a half per week (during company working hours). Due to these severe time constraints, two questions presented themselves:

1. What specific Internet resources can teachers recommend to language learners to complement their formal study?
2. Do these resources encourage students to process more input (reading and listening) and to produce more output (writing and speaking)?

Materials and Procedure: Identifying and Introducing Internet Resources

While there has been considerable valid criticism of the theoretical constructs developed by Krashen (see Zafar (2009) for a brief summary), it is clear that, regardless of the label, "extensive" (Nation, 1997) or "free voluntary" (Krashen, 1993) reading improves language learning. Thus, what is needed is a virtual library providing learners who enjoy Internet access with a wide

spectrum of texts which can accommodate every learner's taste, cultural background and proficiency level.

Moreover, teachers need to go further than encouraging learners to read on their own. There should also be a tool which encourages writing and provides error-correction (feedback). In addition, learners would benefit from observing instances of real communication situations selected by the learners according to their needs. Furthermore, learners require a means of finding speakers of the target language with whom they can speak on a one-to-one basis.

Reading: The advantage of using movie scripts

In the initial stages of the experiment of introducing texts to be read in their spare time the students were asked to search for free ebooks using the *Project Gutenberg* website (https://www.gutenberg.org/). In order to ensure better comprehension, students were encouraged to read books they had already read in their native language, books whose content they would be familiar with (e.g., books about Japan), or books for children which use less complex vocabulary and grammar structures.

However, it soon became apparent that the level of linguistic complexity inherent in texts produced for English native speaking adults or children is too discouraging for most learners who end up feeling inadequate as they struggle for hours to decode a single page. Moreover, books typically use fairly elaborate language and contain very few instances of actually occurring conversations which could model for the student a realistic communicative situation and thus improve learner's chances of acquiring "communicative competence" (Leung, 2005). This is especially true of *Project Gutenberg* ebooks whose content can now be made available free-of-charge only because most of them have been published nearly a century ago.

One solution to this problem is to use movie scripts as reading material. The *Internet Movie Script Database* (*IMSDb*; http://www.imsdb.com/) is a website where users can find virtually any text mirroring what is spoken by characters in the movie, as well as depictions of landscape, building interiors, camera movements etc.

Occasionally, the students had to use a search engine to find scripts for movies/TV series which were not available on *IMSDb*; a simple search using the title of the movie/TV series in quotation marks (to guarantee exact matches) and "script" will yield results in most cases. This

method of searching is particularly useful for foreign-language movies (i.e., movies in the learners' L1) since these texts present the EFL learner with a chance to revisit familiar content in another language. For example, *Studio Ghibli* animation films have enjoyed so much success outside Japan as to guarantee that English language scripts are available.

Writing: Feedback between native speakers

The tendency to assume (especially in Japan) that by "native speakers" we mean "*English* native speakers" belies the unique role played by English in the modern world. Applied linguists have taken note of the political aspects of unquestioningly promoting English as the global lingua franca (Phillipson, 1992). A more subtle aspect of the status quo is that English speakers tend to be seen as potential teachers whereas speakers of other languages are inevitably cast as learners. These "non-native" speakers can, of course, become teachers of English, although their value *as teachers* is a topic of debate (Butcher, 2005; Canagarajah, 1999).

Native or non-native, in the EFL classroom the teacher is usually the only person with whom "the students have real-live contact" (Brown, 2007, p. 78). This way of framing English language learning places severe constraints on how much feedback can be provided and, more importantly, casts the learner in a passive role, even though it is widely held that "one of the keys, but not the only key, to successful second language learning lies in the feedback that a learner receives from others" (Brown, 2007, p. 345).

It is understandable that we as teachers choose to interpret "others" as meaning "the teacher and other students in the same class" as these "others" constitute variables we can observe, control and evaluate in our professional practice (Van Lier, 1989). On the other hand, students could benefit from more feedback if this were possible.

The Internet allows the creation of platforms (such as *Lang-8*; http://lang-8.com) where language learners can exchange feedback on each other's output, with one learner's L1 being the other's L2 and vice versa; in other words, an American student learning Japanese and a Japanese student learning English can each get feedback from a "native speaker".

Moreover, the system can be set up to encourage multiple feedbacks if one user gains the right to produce more texts in the L2 by giving more feedback regarding other language learners' texts (written in the user's L1). Receiving feedback from multiple sources speaking different

varieties of English may prove especially useful in making the learner aware of different norms on what is considered well-formed and/or acceptable (Jenkins, 1998).

Listening: Searching for specific communication situations

With the paradigm "shift from grammar-based pedagogy to Communicative Language Teaching" (Leung, 2005, p. 119), teachers have become keenly aware of the need to provide models of actual exchanges in the target language. The growing weight attached to the concept of "task" which informs task-based language teaching and learning (Nunan, 2004) reflects a strong desire to incorporate "real language use" in textbooks and curriculum design.

That being said, most teachers come to realize sooner or later that catering to all the students' needs given the average class size and the number of lesson hours is next to impossible (Lightbown, 2000, p. 458). One solution is to encourage learners to search for model interactions which come closest to the situation in which they envisage they will have to use English and practice on their own, either by shadowing or together with a learning partner.

A website such as *YouTube* (https://www.youtube.com) can be seen as a keywords- (i.e., notions) searchable database of interactions with both video (to provide context) and audio (to indicate pronunciation) and is freely available to any learner with a decent broadband Internet connection. Tutorials and Do-It-Yourself videos provide excellent opportunities for the learner to devise tasks according to interests and/or needs. Additionally, learners can find short clips from their favorite movies, enjoy watching *TED talks* (www.ted.com) which provide subtitles in the learner's language, or listen to their preferred song while following the lyrics on the screen.

Unfortunately, it was only after two months had passed that the teacher identified a method to address the learners' need to observe examples of real communication in specific situations. The students were taught to use a basic construction ("How to VERB OBJECT @ PLACE") and replace the capitalized words according to their needs in order to give them a starting point and to encourage experimentation (see Table A1 in Appendix A).

Speaking: Finding a learning partner

It is important to note that merely trying to absorb input in the target language from a computer screen will not translate into communicative competence because, as in most human-computer

interactions, the learner's role is essentially a passive one. The more technical term "non-reciprocal discourse" has been used to describe situations in which the learner takes on a passive role such as "listening to the radio or watching a film" (Ellis, 1994, p. 26). The question we are faced with is how to transform the computer from a mere provider of input into a medium which enables the learner to actively engage with the input and to produce output in the target language. In such a case, the computer would only serve as the communication channel through which learners engage in dialogue with others with whom face-to-face interaction is not otherwise feasible.

One of the most exasperating aspects of language teaching is the acute awareness of how little time a learner can actually spend uttering words in the target language. Most teachers would agree with the claim that "a teacher's greatest dilemma is how to attend to each individual student in a class while still reaching the class as a whole group" (Brown, 2007, p. 69). In teacher-student conversations, the time for speaking practice must be equally divided by the number of students, whereas in student-student conversations (pair-talk) errors may go uncorrected, students may lapse back to their L1, while some may even be unwilling to talk with somebody who is not a "real" English speaker.

Moreover, if we consider how much time must be devoted to explanations, clarifications and to the other tasks aimed at improving reading or writing skills, it soon becomes apparent that the question is not *how many* but rather whether *any* students can be expected to gain the ability to communicate in English through classroom instruction alone. It is extremely telling that even language professionals who have stressed the need of providing learners with "the opportunity to take part in meaningful communicative interaction with highly competent speakers of the language" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 27) devote time to describing the "implications for a communicative approach to teaching" (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 31) without considering the implications for a communicative approach to learning.

Clearly, regardless of how progressive the teaching approach and how talented the teacher, classroom instruction alone cannot yield a satisfactory level of communicative competence. Indeed, before our current age of interconnectedness, we could generalize that "the most important reason for incomplete acquisition in foreign language classroom settings is probably the lack of time available for contact with the language" (Lightbown, 2000, p. 449). One consequence

is that most teachers encourage their students to seek out opportunities to communicate in the target language on their own in line with Rubin's generalization stating that good learners create their own opportunities to practice the language both inside and outside the classroom (Rubin, 1975, p. 44). However, the question of where outside the classroom still remains.

The above-mentioned *Lang-8* website was developed as a language learning tool to be outside the classroom to improve writing skills, so it was perhaps inevitable that a similar platform would be developed to enable spoken interactions between learners. *ConversationExchange* (http://www.conversationexchange.com) is a website which allows registered users to pair up with a (native or non-native) speaker of the target language. *ConversationExchange* provides greater flexibility than *Lang-8* in choosing the type of interaction: face-to-face, via video-chat software (e.g., *Skype*, *Windows Live Messenger*, *Google Talk*) or simply by email. In practice, this means that learners only use the website as a searchable database of potential language learning partners.

Results and Discussion

With regard to the first research question ("What specific Internet resources can teachers recommend to language learners to complement their formal study?"), this paper has identified four web resources which can be used by learners to improve each of the four skills. These resources can be presented as a brief list which teachers can share with their students (see Table A2 in Appendix A).

Alternatively, training programs for non-native English teachers (e.g., the English Education Reform Plan; Monbukagakushō, 2014b) could benefit from using these resources as more time could be devoted to the pedagogical aspects of TEFL and less to improving the teachers' English language proficiency.

Answering the second research question ("Do these resources encourage students to process more input (reading and listening) and to produce more output (writing and speaking)?") proved more difficult because the students met with considerable success in utilizing certain resources while failing to engage at all with other resources.

Evaluation of engagement with these resources was carried out on a weekly basis by discussing the data recorded in each student's file (see Table A3 in Appendix A).

This tool for self-monitoring was introduced before identifying *Lang-8* and *ConversationExchange* as useful resources. In practice, this delay made the students less likely to engage interactively with other learners using the above resources because writing emails to the teacher and shadowing utterances by native speakers was perceived as less demanding than actively searching for a learning partner.

Additionally, the assessment method employed by the company (TOEIC tests administered twice a year) ensured that input-processing skills were prioritized over output-producing skills. This skewing of priorities towards a passive learner role is all the more disheartening considering the widespread awareness of the demotivating effects of using a test-centered approach to language teaching (Clark, 2013, p. 6).

A different issue arose from the fact that the learners were typical Japanese company employees who found very little time (typically less than one hour a week while commuting to work by train or in the lunch breaks) to interact in English using this methodology, which inevitably resulted in focusing on reading since it provided the greatest degree of flexibility under these conditions.

Reading

Students who attempted to read movie scripts reported increased motivation and improved self-image. These results (see Table A4 in Appendix A) are very encouraging for both teachers and students since they show that even those with relatively low proficiency levels (TOEIC scores in the 500 points range) can begin to enjoy reading texts in English.

As a cautionary note, it is important to allow for an accommodation period of roughly one month during which learners should be free to change the chosen text with something which better matches their interests and/or proficiency levels if their first choices prove to be more difficult/less interesting than expected.

Whether learners use free ebooks or movie scripts, these texts provide "meaningful context" (Stevick, 1989, p. 16) which is so sorely lacking in vocabulary lists and increase student motivation to engage with texts they themselves selected thus ensuring their "emotional investment" (Norton Peirce, 1995).

Writing

Although students were encouraged to use *Lang-8* to practice writing in English, only four (out of 14) took the first step of registering as users of this website and only two students reported using it occasionally. Three factors contributed to this situation.

Firstly, the students' need to improve writing was almost exclusively centered on composing business emails, a task for which they were prepared for through personal tutoring by the teacher and through various Business English courses organized by the company.

Secondly, students had to submit written homework weekly in order to practice what they had learned during company-organized lessons using an English grammar textbook (Murphy, 2012). In effect, the formal assignment competed with free writing with the foreseeable result that little or no time remained for the latter.

Lastly, based on the teacher's analysis of student needs, it was concluded that the limited available time was better used for improving the other three skills, with the recommendation to write diary-like entries on *Lang-8* whenever extra time became available. In doing this, it was acknowledged that, as adults, "learners should 'own' their learning so teachers should negotiate the curriculum with the learners based on learner need" (Feez, 2001, p. 211).

Listening

Students averaged over 25 hours of exposure to spoken English over a six-month period (see Table A5 in Appendix A) during their spare time. Those students who combined reading movie scripts with listening to the corresponding video clips reported increased satisfaction.

In the initial stages, the students were only instructed to experiment using *YouTube* and find content which would be familiar (to improve comprehension) and interesting (to increase motivation). As the course progressed, there was an increasing awareness of the need to watch/hear model interactions in specific situations in which the students might find themselves. The teacher devised a tool to help students in this respect (see Table A1 in Appendix A), but the two-month delay blunted its effectiveness.

In practice, this meant that students who had become accustomed to using certain resources simply continued using them even after the teacher introduced the above-mentioned

tool. News articles and TED talks proved to be popular among learners since the same content could be easily accessed in their own language. Additionally, several students used various English learning apps and educational software which included an audio component as resources to practice listening, even though they expressed little interest in the actual content.

As a point of self-reflection, the teacher's manner of defining input and output may have resulted in the learners' tendency to identify listening resources only as tools for improving their comprehension of English (i.e., materials for exam preparation) instead of opportunities to observe and practice communication in a given context (Aubrey, 2014, p. 154).

Speaking

Only two students attempted to use *ConversationExchange* and neither went further than completing user-registration. Time constraints, problems with securing the required computer tools (microphone, camera etc.) and a risk averse culture (Salacuse, 1998) may help explain the lack of engagement.

While the Internet makes it relatively easy to find a language learning partner, this type of flexibility comes with certain risks (e.g., loss of anonymity) as learners must negotiate the terms of their interaction and manage it on their own. Time-zone differences and computer literacy are just two among the numerous problems (Singhal, 1997) faced by those attempting to use web resources such as *ConversationExchange*.

It may be the case that only learners with an outgoing type of personality are willing to initiate communication with perfect strangers. Be that as it may, it is crucial that learners become aware of what is available and how it can further their learning opportunities as well as their "learner autonomy" (Gardner, 2011).

Limitations

Even though data in this paper attempted to show how students make use of these web resources, it should be emphasized that the results presented here cannot be generalized, given the constraints within which students (engineers working full-time in the manufacturing industry) had to learn.

Indeed, it may be too much to expect Japanese adults (working full-time while simultaneously attending to the needs of their families) to make full use of Internet resources which try to stimulate learner output. Further research attempting to empirically assess the effectiveness of *learner-customized interaction* should probably target university students and/or adults who enjoy more flexibility in managing their spare time.

Additionally, these resources may constitute the least taxing method of improving English language proficiency among Japanese teachers of English involved in primary and secondary education.

Conclusion

This paper argued that teachers need to ask their students to take on a larger share of the burden of learning and even to actively search for *additional* "teachers" (i.e., other users of Lang-8 and ConversationExchange websites). Accordingly, some readers may be left with the impression that this study is advocating a surrender of (some of) the teacher's duties. Rather the purpose of this study is to expose the *hubris* inherent in the current language teaching doctrine which is still in the process of re-focusing from traditional methods (centered on the teacher) to communicative approaches (which attempt to focus equally on the teacher *and* the learner).

It has been widely acknowledged that learners' chances to succeed depend largely on the "learner's own personal 'investment' of time, effort, and attention to the second language in the form of an individualized battery of strategies for comprehending and producing the language" (Brown, 2007, p. 69). However, this insight is deemed useful only insofar as it can inform pedagogical practice. Teachers (and students) must accept that meeting the ambitious goal of acquiring communicative competence in a foreign language may depend less on teaching itself and more on the ability to guide students to improve their learning practice.

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Appendix A

Learning Tools and Learner Interaction Record

Table A1. *Finding relevant/useful information in tutorial videos*

How to VERB OBJECT @ PLACE
1) How to make a reservation at the hotel
2) How to reclaim lost luggage at the airport
3) How to order food at the restaurant
4) How to plant grape vines
5) How to cook French toast

6) How to improve at golf

7) How to replace a car tire

Table A2. *Resources for customized interactions*

Skill to be improved	*Website title* URL
Reading	*The Internet Movies Script Database* http://www.imsdb.com/
Writing	*Lang-8* http://lang-8.com/
Listening	*YouTube* https://www.youtube.com/
Speaking	*Conversation Exchange* http://www.conversationexchange.com/

Table A3. *Input-Output Record (extract from student A01's file)*

Period	Reading (15 min./day) Text: Read/Total	Listening (15 min./day) Dialogue situation	Writing (one/week) Emails	Speaking (5 min./day)
Aug 12-19	15x3 Friends 01: 7/13	15x5 (ESL)	0 emails	15x5 Shadowing
Aug 19-28	15x3 Friends 01: 13/13	30x2 + 15x7 (Friends + ESL)	5 emails	15x7 Shadowing
Aug 28 - Sep 2	15x5 Friends 02: 13/13	30x2 + 15x12 (Friends + ESL)	4 emails	15x12 Shadowing
Sep 2-9	0 Holiday	30x2 + 15x10 (Friends + ESL)	1 email	15x10 Shadowing
Sep 9-20	15x5 Friends 03: 15/15	15x20 (ESL)	2 emails	15x20 Shadowing

Sep 20-26	15x5 Friends 04: 14/14	15x10 (ESL)	1 email	15x10 Shadowing
Sep 26-30	15x4 Friends 05: 13/13	15x5 (ESL)	1 email	15x5 Shadowing
Sep 30 - Oct 11	15x4 Friends 06: 13/13	15x5 (ESL)	2 emails	15x5 Shadowing
Oct 11-21	0 Overseas trip	15x5 + work (ESL)	0 emails	15x5 + work Shadowing
Oct 22-28	0 Overseas trip	15x5 + work (ESL)	0 emails	15x5 + work Shadowing

Table A4. *Student reading data (June 2013 - February 2014)*

Student ID	Title of written English input chosen by students	Pages (MS Word) (approx.)	TOEIC score (reading) Jun. 2013	Dec. 2013
A01	Friends (script)	200 pages	765 (370)	735 (355)
A02	Les Miserables (script) Alice's Adventures (book)	80 pages 140 pages	520 (180)	535 (200)
A03	Star Wars: Ep. 4 (script)	310 pages	585 (255)	605 (285)
A04	Braveheart (script) Men and women (book)	200 pages 160 pages	645 (330)	685 (350)
A05	Back to the future (script)	60 pages	650 (300)	680 (280)
A06	Back to the future (script)	40 pages	685 (360)	700 (395)
A07	Japan Times (weekly)	300 pages	575 (265)	NA
A08	Star Wars Ep. 6 (script)	40 pages	525 (230)	470 (225)
A09	Titanic (script)	40 pages	590 (260)	565 (220)
A10	Sabriel (book) NHK presentations (script)	1250 pages 800 pages	850 (420)	780 (360)
A11	Harry Potter (script)	50 pages	530 (155)	505 (190)
A12	Harry Potter (script)	5 pages	510 (250)	NA

A13	Back to the future (script) Heart of Samurai (book)	100 pages 210 pages	700 (345)	740 (330)
A14	About a boy (script) Big fish (script) Notting Hill (book)	70 pages 60 pages 50 pages	810 (345)	755 (340)

Table A5. *Student listening data (June 2013 - February 2014)*

Student ID	Type of spoken English input chosen by students	Number of hours	TOEIC score (listening only)	
			Jun. 2013	Dec. 2013
A01	Movies, news	40 hours	765 (395)	735 (380)
A02	TED talks	30 hours	520 (340)	535 (335)
A03	Movies, news, stand-up, EL app	25 hours	585 (330)	605 (320)
A04	Movies, TOEIC practice, news, work	40 hours	645 (315)	685 (335)
A05	News, songs	7 hours	650 (350)	650 (400)
A06	TOEIC practice, work	60 hours	685 (325)	700 (305)
A07	US Navy radio program	25 hours	575 (310)	NA
A08	TED talks, news	30 hours	525 (295)	470 (245)
A09	E-learning, work	25 hours	590 (330)	565 (345)
A10	TED talks, news, NHK English	20 hours	850 (430)	780 (420)
A11	Song, news, NHK English	17 hours	530 (375)	505 (315)
A12	NA	NA	510 (260)	NA
A13	EL software, TOEIC practice, TED talks	28 hours	700 (355)	740 (410)

A14	Movies, TED talks, NHK English	26 hours	810 (465)	755 (415)